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MEMORIAL DAY

ORATION,

DELIVERED IN THE

City Hall, Dover, N. H.,

UNDER THE AUSPICES OF

Charles W. Sawyer Post, G. A. R.,

BY

REV. LEANDER S. COAN,

MAY 30, 1876.

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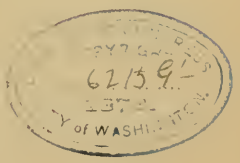

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ADDRESS.

LYCURGUS, the Spartan lawgiver, who allowed no inscriptions upon the monuments of the dead, made an exception in favor of those who died in battle. That they died for Sparta, was ground for perpetuating their deeds and virtues. This, whatever its object, resulted in rearing a race, ready to die for national honor. By doing justice to the dead, the living were inspired to nobler deeds.

Who shall chide us, if we in like spirit set apart one day in every year to twine our wreaths for our dead who died in battle; died not for aggrandizement by aggressive warfare, but for the preservation of national life and liberty? Who shall chide us if we pause one hour in a year to read the inscriptions on their monuments, or to drop a tear upon "nameless" graves? Not because we love them more than the rest of our dead, but because we also love the land for which they died.

We are gathered here to supplement the formal ceremonies of Memorial Day; to seek inspiration from the example of those whom we have hon-

ored to-day, to treasure the lessons of the past, and to take a look forward; hoping thereby to gain clearer conceptions of the duties that devolve upon us in this initial year of the second century.

The services we perform to-day have unusual significance. We are not only permitted to contemplate the sacrifices of the loyal dead, but are given to behold the consummation of that for which they died. It requires no great discernment to see that, if their graves had not been filled, there would have been to our nation no Centennial Year; or, that our flag would have disgraced us all by waving over more than four million slaves.

I for one come to the duties of this hour with no partisan bitterness, with no desire to perpetuate strife. I will ask no humiliating deed of the brave men whom we fought. If it were in my power to reach out and drop a flower upon every grave of a northern man who fell, I would likewise drop one upon every other green mound that covers one who wore the gray. We do not ask them to level the graves of their heroes. As they deck them with the flowers of Spring, they shall have no rebuke from me. And if I were to meet a man who fought against us, if he to-day honors the flag, and loves our native land, I would give him my hand with a soldier's greeting. I have already forgiven, but until memory and the green mounds we have to-day visited are obliterated, I cannot forget. It were unwise for either the North or South to blot out the lessons of the past fifteen years.

Can we forget the day when Sumter's guns rang through the land their booming defence of the old Flag? Can we forget that day when the blood rushed

back upon our hearts, when our faces grew pale, but not from fear? There was no cowardly fear, but there was a suffocating fear for the honor of that starry Ensign of Liberty for which so many have fallen. Then, while hands were clenched, and lips compressed, while tears fell hot and fast over many faces, then was first kindled the patriot flame that went not out until death quenched it upon our country's altar of sacrifice. It would be a national disgrace and disaster if we were to forget the lofty enthusiasm of those days. Standing by the graves of our dead comrades, I firmly believe, that neither Swiss, Roman nor Spartan youth ever loved native land with loftier or purer devotion, or died for national honor with holier zeal than those same youth whose graves we have wet with our tears; who rose that day with a strange new light in their eyes and an unquenchable fire in their hearts.

Revenge and bitterness may go, shall go, nay, have already gone, into oblivion. But if with these, the lessons of the past, to the North and South alike are to be lost; if the graves of our dead on both sides must be leveled; if the zeal of fathers, brothers, and friends is to be forgotten; if we must forget the honor of preserving national life; if oblivion is to take the thought that we have a nation worth dying for—then that oblivion had better never come. If the peace and oblivion, which are held up by some as the ideal of the American patriot, require me to hush my breath and speak it softly when I speak of Loyalty and the Flag; if they require me to declare that there is not, nor has been, nor can be such a thing as Treason—if that be, then the mistake of the war was not in rebellion, but the mistake was in following the

old Flag with the delusive dream that it was the symbol of a Nation.

By the side of the graves of those who died facing us, under the flag that went down; men whose courage we honor; whose valor we know; whose manliness we admire; of whose soldierly qualities we are proud, in that they are America's sons; whose graves we to-day would adorn with brotherly hands, bringing emblems of peace;—standing by their graves we can, we must, affirm it: An armed rebellion was Treason, and the instigation thereof a crime.

Unwittingly committed by the greater part of that great host of brave men, yet still a crime, though as conscientiously thought to be the duty of patriotism as any of us considered our aims to be. If the lessons we have learned, are to go into oblivion, then one-fourth of a million brave men died in vain. By the side of the graves, the countless graves, by the Appomattox, and at Arlington Heights, and those that we to-day have honored, we will reaffim it: Our National Law defines such an offence as Treason, and recognizes it as a crime. An offence already atoned for; for which we ask humiliation of no man; for which we demand no penance; ask no sycophantic abnegation of valorous southern manhood. But while we thus honor them, take them by the hand and delight to see them stand erect by our sides as brothers, we can not, we will not, forget the pale, mutely pleading faces of our loyal dead. Their tottering and torn forms plead to us; their motionless lips seem to whisper, Do not dishonor our memory; do not surrender that for which we died.

With these silent hosts for witnesses, witnesses

clad both in blue and gray, we make the bequest of the First to the Second Century of National life: We give and bequeathe to the next century one Flag, that has never been dishonored, that has never trailed in the dust, upon these conditions: That it shall float through that cycle from the Lakes to the Gulf, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, unchallenged and revered; that it shall cover no slave; that it shall protect men of the North and South alike, on land or sea, men whose rival valor it shall forever perpetuate. While we mean that it shall preserve the fame of their equal heroism, the generous manliness of rival spirits, we mean that the first century shall also bequeathe to the second a knowledge, not to be forgotten, of the difference between Loyalty and Treason. This was also the last will and testament of our loyal dead, as it to-day is ours, and they signed it and sealed it in our presence with their blood.

Have we a Nation worth dying for?

Sometimes, before the days of sixty-one, men told us that there was no longer any valor in our men; no longer any noble ambition in our youth; that there was no longer any true patriot devotion, but only an effeminate selfishness, a puerile degeneracy that lived with no higher ambition than the greed of gain. And at times when we saw the dissipation and dishonor of some men; the apparent frivolity of many of our youth, we were fearful that these boding fears of the scholastic recluse, these evil prophesies of pulpit and press, were well founded. How now about those fears which then possessed us?

I am not one who supposes that our armies performed unheard of prodigies of valor; that our Gen-

erals accomplished such strategy as no others had ever performed; nor that we shed oceans of blood where before, men had only shed rivers or seas. But to those who in eighteen sixty said that patriotism was dead; that sober or sublime love of the Flag no longer existed; that courage and endurance were things of the past,—I would make answer by pointing to the now historic marches of the war; to the tenacity of that slow-moving old army of the Potomac; to those beardless boys who, on their way to Antietam, marched till the horses gave out by the way; point them to the scores of thousands of graves which to-day have been adorned; suggest them to remember those ghastly trenches where hundreds were piled, enriching southern soil with the best of our own flesh and blood; yea, if it be not treason so to do, will ask them to hang in their homes where they can see them wither and fade, the flowers it is not our privilege to place upon the nameless graves at Andersonville and Macon, over the men who died there rather than abjure their fealty to the old Flag. And when they have numbered our dead; taken knowledge of our scarred legions which have scattered to their farms, shops, ships, stores, offices and pulpits, back to enjoy the peace they conquered;—who, then, will have the insulting effrontery to affirm in this year of our seventy-six, that our brothers had no courage, no endurance, no old time patriot zeal? Facts that we have seen, history that we have written with bayonet and sword, prove that those fears were a libel upon American manhood. We did not know ourselves until the horrors of war assailed us; until National peril menaced.

Our fears to-day are different. We fear the in-

sidious presence of corruption. We surmise a widespread infection of personal dishonor. We ask, what if the majority are rotten or defected? And it sometimes seems that the lust of money, and baser lusts, can do what lust of power and the sword could not. And there is some ground for our fear.

When men in high places of honor betray their sacred trusts, shall we infer that the people are thus corrupt?

Let us not be guilty of another libel upon National honor. To my mind these facts prove, not that the people are corrupt, but do prove rather that they are misrepresented. They prove too little scrutiny on our part, of the united honor and ability of the men we have elevated; that men of honor and judgment have too long left important primary duties to selfish and designing men. This assertion of universal rottenness of the public heart is an insult to all, to every one of our noble men far and near, whose souls have not been soiled by treason to truth; whose hearts are not rotten nor even tainted with dishonor; whose hands have not been soiled with bribes; and whose heads have not been turned with the insane greed for official position. The same hosts of men who, in sixty-one, arose as one man in defence of our national life; in defence of national honor; are going to rise again, and if you will heed it, are rising to-day, and this time in vindication of personal honor, of personal and official purity. It may take four years, it may take eight to crush this rebellion against personal integrity, but the years now coming shall witness another triumph of law and truth. And as in those other days, there were not wanting men to lead us, so there shall not be now.

We are now suffering no new thing. Turn to the pages of history if you think we are. And when England or Englishmen, or Americans either, sneer at our public frauds, and suggest how much better it is in a monarchy, point you in answer to Lord Bacon, and ask if they ever heard of bribes before. Point to Warren Hastings, and ask if they ever heard of selfish governing. Turn to the early pages of English fiction and read, the like of which you will only find to-day on tables in brothels; and further learn that those same immaculate pages were found upon the tables of the best society of that day. Read of court intrigues, of open, unblushing, but now disreputable lives of lust, and you shall find that these sad developments are nothing new in national growth. The corruption manifested in too many high places does not represent the American people.

This violent effort to throw off evil indicates life. Such vigorous retching is not known in cases of extreme weakness and debility. This effort of the body politic to purge itself, shows soundnesss and health somewhere that is stronger than the disease. A case of defalcation, or of political personal disgrace, is sent with the speed of lightning, with a partisan zest that rejoices in iniquity, to those tireless servants of the people (who too often toil thanklessly for the public weal,) and is known the next day after its discovery, from Maine to California, and read by millions at their morning repast. But no lightning messenger does or can hasten to blazon the sickening shame that seizes upon millions of honest hearts. But, gentlemen, you have only to wait until their indignant voices are heard. This wrong will right itself. The sailor, after a few days out at sea, finds

the water in his casks, ropy and apparently impure and unfit for use. But he has only to wait, until, by some subtle and unknown chemical process, the slime disappears. How, we cannot explain, but the facts we know. Some way the pure air of God's blue heaven sucks the impurity out.

As a nation we are but a few days on our long voyage. And be you sure some way the body politic will work itself clear. Fountains of purity will yet gladden the voyagers upon the old ship of state. Had it been our destiny to go down, had the old barque lacked the toughness and strength to withstand the storm, before this the waves of time would have rolled over her. The tense and awful strain of the past fifteen years has passed by. Shall we now throw ourselves into the sea because the waters of political life are ropy and impure? We may well learn a lesson from nature; well heed the teachings of history.

The Everlasting, God, looking from the infinite calms of Heaven, saw manhood enough in the land to redeem it. He has made no mistake in allowing us to proceed. Had it been our fate to write the record of former Republics, then was the time for our destruction.

Have these western shores waited in vain? Was the mould in which destiny intended to cast a great nation, planned and placed here for naught? Are the vast resources of this continent to lie idle and useless? Is the star of the New World's empire to grow dim? Is the great Anglo-Saxon race to prove an abortive failure, as it must, if our boding fears are true prophesies of history? In five hundred years I believe that a new race will have arisen from the materials already entered into its structure, that shall

have written a history under the guardian genius of American Liberty, that shall cause the brightest dreams of poets and seers to pale in comparison with the splendor of its full-orbed brightness.

God has some meaning in the limitless resources of this vast land. And if we are unworthy, or unequal to the task that fate has assigned us, He can sweep us all away, and from the prolific womb of Time bring forth another people, equal to and worthy of the Destiny before them. There will be much apparent death and decay, but the foul and impure shall, at successive stages, slough away, and the young giant of the New World shall arise to grapple his toil.

In the shadow of the past, then, treasuring the lessons of history, thrilled by the manifest promise of the future, with the sun of American honor glinting across the graves of our dead, with heads uncovered and faces toward the opening vistas of the future, with reverent and prayerful faith in our National Destiny, standing on one of the headlands that will yet be grandly historic, to-day we will record our answer: *Our torn and toiling Nation* WAS, AND IS, WORTH DYING FOR!

And now, before closing, a word about the duties of this Centennial year. It would be puerile and cowardly in view of our past, and the future we hope for, to say that any suggestions of the practical present public duty of citizens, are unworthy of notice to-day, or unworthy of any day, or of any hour or of any man. The moment a man steps from broad general views to suggest practical present duties, it is the fashion among some to decry and belittle such

effort by the cry of "political" and "partisan." That very tendency is one of the fruitful causes of our present political disgrace. Statesmen and wise men have withheld such advice in hours of public exigency, because they feared partisan outcry; and have left too long, the indication of practical public duty, in the supposed to be lower field, of politics, to tricksters and scheming time-servers who have too long disgraced us. The demand of duty shall not be silenced to-day, by any obstreperous assumption of superior sagacity. Our word of practical suggestion shall be given, we trust, with a discretion, pertinency and dignity befitting the occasion.

If New Hampshire to-day were to be called upon to decide which, of two historic names, Franklin Pierce or Daniel Webster, should receive her suffrages for the first gift in the land, who supposes, without casting any discredit upon Pierce, that Webster would not be the name written first? And yet, in the wisdom of political management, choice was given to Pierce, while a Webster could not receive the suffrages of New Hampshire's sons. He would have honored the State more than the State could have honored him, and yet, in the blinding clouds of partisan strife, men failed to discern the colossal stature of the man. If to-day you could choose between a Clay and a Polk, who doubts where your choice would fall? And yet, men once made a different choice. The strange and unsound argument against these defeated giants was that they had been too long in public life! And has it come to this? Is it a part of the unwritten law of the land, that active, honorable service in public life, is to disqualify a man, even with his friends and admirers, for the highest place in the

land? Shall we, this Centennial year, commit the cowardly blunder of putting aside men of known ability, tried and true, for lesser men, because they are unknown? It is to be hoped that we have grown wiser than this would indicate.

Let us then this year enter upon the experiment of not trying an experiment, in choice of a ruler. We will in the duties of the hour label ourselves as no man's men; but I for one will put on record my preference for a leader, some man of known purity. But purity alone is not enough; ability is needed. And these must combine. And here, would denounce as unworthy the name of statesmanship, the cowardice that dares not speak; and condemn as a fatal error the shuffling political policy which declares that experience, honor and ability, known devotion to National unity, can unfit a man for the leadership of our people. I utter no name; but in the name of reason, and in the light of disastrous experience, plead that availability be not counted before ability. Pleading, not that statesmanship shall be lowered to the present political level, but rather that political duties, even in primary matters, shall be raised up and be dignified with the wisdom of statesmanship. To the ruler who shall be chosen in this Centennial year, probably more than any other for years to come, will it be given to shape and mould the coming century. Let us then as those who make rulers, we who shall be governed by them, pray and strive that no hand upon which rests the stain of a disloyal sword or ballot; upon no unwise, unclean, no bungling hand, shall rest the responsibility of holding the helm of State; the honor of maintaining the dignity of the Nation. Let us

have a ruler, loyal and true enough to detect both Treason and Fraud, with a will and purpose firm enough to punish either when detected.

Whoever he is to be, the republic is to give him a place among the world's great names, either to honor or shame us for our choice. We are to give into his hand the Flag, as an emblem of our nation's honor. It is no light task that is ours, or will be his. He should be able and wise to guard it well.

Comrades of the Grand Army, I salute you. To-day your numbers are many, and in the heated state of the public mind your services are sometimes forgotten. But in the coming years, when the last comrade shall be carried to his long bivouac, then shall the whole land salute you. It is ours to have preserved unsullied the glory of this old Flag. Nor envy nor treason can wrest from us this honor. We have seen it in the smoke of battle. At Gettysburg, when the gray wave of treason met the loyal blue; when the Capitol was a loyal island, surrounded by the surging sea of Rebellion; when from the contending waves of battle the white spray of steel leaped and blended together, and the voice of fate said to the Southern surge, *Thus far shalt thou come, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed!* there we beheld it above the smoke and turmoil of conflict. And when the dun cloud rolled away, over the green earth and under the blue arch, still it floated, torn and soiled indeed, but not torn from lack of defenders, nor soiled by disgrace or cowardice.

Our love for this banner is not empty boasting. These sentiments are not simply an idle sentiment. We have written them with sword and bayonet upon

the white page of American history, in red letters with our own blood.

Our Flag! To-day, again, in the light of the past, in hope of the future, we salute it. The breezes of coming centuries shall kiss its folds. Generation after generation yet unborn shall thank us for the bequest we have handed down to them. Take it tenderly and reverently, ye coming years; and clear and fair against the blue heaven of future days, let it float where our children's children may behold it. May it be their holy ambition to keep it free from dishonorable stain. And may the day never come when it shall float over men who would not, if honor call, give it a brighter hue with their own hearts' best crimson.

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